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ABSTRACT

A graduate reading course provided students a hands-on experience in using dialog journals with elementary school children to illustrate the value of integrating writing opportunities into reading programs. Every week of the semester reading methods students read, responded, and returned the journals to the cooperating elementary classes. Only five basic guidelines regarding the nature of responses were followed: being positive and letting the children know they were becoming good readers and writers; encouraging interactions by answering questions and posing questions; modeling correct mechanics; moving the children closer to talk about their reading and writing; and writing responses so that the children could read them easily. Observation and comments in the graduate students' personal journals indicated increased student awareness of the need for similar writing projects in their reading programs as well as improved insights about interests of elementary children and their writing problems. (KEH)

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"Glimpses of a Child's Mind:
Journaling Beyond the Campus to the Classroom"

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RATIONALE: Recent surveys have surfaced concerns with both the quantity and quality of writing in many elementary classrooms. I believe one of my primary goals as a teacher educator is to assist my students in becoming aware of these concerns and to help them begin to address these problems. I believe that one of the best small first steps that an elementary teacher can take to make changes in the area of writing is to implement the use of dialogue journals. Through the use of these journals, clasroom teachers can easily provide their students with writing opportunities that are regular, authentic, choice-based, and communication-focused. As the use of these journals become more sophisticated, they have the potential to foster significant growth in both readers and writers.

In deciding how to help my students become familiar with dialogue journals, I decided that a hands-on experience may be more effective than just reading and talking about this technique. Unfortunately, the reading methods course I teach operates without a field-based component. I did use the technique with my students, but I wanted to provide them with experience using the dialogue journals with real children. I explored the possibility of setting up an exchange of journals between my reading methods students and a class of elementary students. I believed that such an exchange would allow me to move closer to my two goals which were to convince my students of the value in integrating more writing opportunities into their reading programs and to provide my students with a convenient opportunity to become more familiar with the students they would be working with in the future. As one mother put it, I wanted to my students "to gain a personal glimpse into a child's mind."

PROCEDURE: I introduced the idea of an exchange in a graduate reading course. A veteran Chapter I reading teacher Dianne Bushkie expressed an interest in the exchange and we worked together to implement the program. She purchased "bare books" for each of her remedial reading students in which to record their entries. Once a week, the books were left with me for my reading methods students. My students responded and the books were returned to the elementary students later that week. This weekly routine was maintained throughout the semester.

The reading methods students were given only minimal instruction on how to respond to the elementary students. Five basic guidelines were followed: 1) Be positive -- let them know they are becoming good readers and writers, 2) Encourage interactions by answering their questions and posing questions for them to answer, 3) Model correct mechanics, 4) Move them closer to talk about their reading and writing, and 5) Write the response so that the elementary students can read it.

Our class procedure was kept very simple. On the day that the methods students were to respond to the journals, a few minutes of class time were set aside. Transitional time at the beginning and/or

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end of class was also utilized by the students in recording their responses. I would also share comments that Dianne had made in a journal that she was exchanging with me. These comments often related to her students' responses to the project. Since the the schools were over sixty miles apart, only one face-to-face meeting between the students was scheduled. The Chapter I students and their families decided to come to the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh campus as a part of their annual field trip. The college students acted as guides for the elementary students and their families.

Much of the information I collected regarding the project was first hand information observed as a result of participating in the ongoing project. I also asked my students to write about the experience in the journals they were keeping for the methods class. In addition, some students also chose to use the exchange to satisfy a class requirement involving a written report focused on a "practical" reading experience. All students completed written surveys about the experience near the end of the project.

RESULTS: Did I meet my two objectives? I did feel that participation in the project increased students' awareness of the need for similar writing projects in their reading programs. As one student observed: "This was a positive experience. One I will remember and use in the future." For me, it had allowed my students to have independent practice with a technique I had previously only described and modeled. I also felt that the project had provided my students with valuable insights about the children they would be working with in the near future. They described having received new insights about everything from the typical interests of elementary children to the common types of writing problems shared by elementary children. Dianne also observed that the project had resulted in valuable changes in her students. She noted both skill and attitude changes directly linked to the project.

Beyond the students, both teacher participants were also affected by the project. For me, it confirmed in practice what I had believed in theory -- journal writing is an effective, efficient way to get more writing in elementary reading programs with many cognitive and affective benefits for the students. For Dianne -- a teacher that had not experimented much with writing in her Chapter I program -- it resulted in new insights about writing. Dianne described changes in her views seeing less need for teacher-directed writing topics, the effectiveness of modeling correct mechanics as an instructional tool, the inherent motivation in authentic literacy tasks, and the value of frequent, personal writing as a way for teachers to get to know their students. The project had positive effects for all involved -- the elementary students, the emerging teachers, the veteran teacher and the teacher educator.

Related Resources:

Bode, Barbara A. (1989). "Dialogue Journal Writing." The Reading Teacher, 42, 568-571.

Bromley, Karen D. (1989). "Buddy Journals Make the Reading-Writing Connection." The Reading Teacher, 43, 122-129.

Bushkie, Dianne, and Ford, Michael P. (1989). "Glimpses of a Child's Mind: Two Perspectives on Journaling from the Classroom to the Campus." The Wisconsin State Reading Association Journal, 33, 13-18.

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Strickland, Dorothy. (1987). "Literature: Key Element in the Language and Reading Program." in Cullinan, Bernice (ed.). Children's Literature in the Reading Program. (Newark, DE: The Internatiuonal Reading Association).

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